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Items for information: principles governing international statistical activities

Implementation of principles governing international statistical activities

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the information note prepared by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities on implementation of principles governing international statistical activities. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

Information note of the Committee for Coordination of Statistical Activities on implementation of principles governing international statistical activities

1. At its thirty-seventh session, in 2006, the Statistical Commission welcomed the principles governing international statistical activities, which had been prepared and endorsed by the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. The Commission noted that the Committee had agreed that the principles could be used in different ways by agencies depending on their specific mandate and governance (legal framework). As a follow-up action, the Commission requested the Committee to assess the implementation of the principles and report the results of the assessment to the Statistical Commission at its thirty-ninth session.[1]

2. In October 2007, the United Nations Statistics Division, as the secretariat of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, invited all partner

* E/CN.3/2008/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24), chap I.C, decision 37/110.

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24), chap. I.C, decision 37/110 (e) (i).

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agencies to briefly describe which principles had already been implemented and which areas might require attention in the near future and to provide examples of recent actions taken in support of implementing the principles. The individual institutional self-assessments, as of February 2008, are contained in a background document to the present report. The document summarizes the main findings with respect to the various principles and highlights examples of actions taken to implement specific elements of the principles. It also briefly mentions the areas where, in the view of some agencies, further work is needed.

3. It should be noted that as a first important step to implementation, some agencies undertook the effort to bring the principles to the attention of the higher political levels in their respective institutions, in order to extend the commitment of their organizations beyond the purely technical statistical level. This was the case with the Secretariat, notably the regional commissions, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the Statistics Division, which sought and obtained in October 2007 the formal endorsement of the principles by the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs.

4. It should also be mentioned that some agencies have their own institutional instruments and processes that are closely related to the content and spirit of the principles. For instance, the International Monetary Fund has the Data Quality Assessment Framework; Eurostat has committed itself to ensuring that the principles of the European Statistics Code of Practice are respected. In this context, in October 2007 Eurostat underwent a formal peer review, which covered Eurostat's institutional environment and dissemination practices in line with the common European Statistical System methodology. The peer review report will be published on the Eurostat website.

5. In general and in the context of their institutional settings, agencies expressed in their submissions their continued commitment to the implementation of all 10 principles and related good practices regarding their work in the international arena. Highlights concerning the individual principles are given below.

Principle 1: Relevance, impartiality and equal access
High-quality international statistics, accessible to all, are a fundamental element of global information systems.

6. The most regular consultation with main clients consists usually of a review by an executive board of the various institutional statistical programmes. New consultative initiatives, such as Internet-based user satisfaction surveys, were found to improve the dialogue with key users. Many agencies also reported that they were using the Internet to provide better access to their data. In that context, some agencies recently eliminated the subscription charges for specific databases. Although the trend is towards having more data become publicly available, it is not clear from the agency submissions to what extent all statistics in international organizations are accessible and/or whether access is provided with a timelag as compared with access by internal users.

Principle 2: Professional standards and ethics
To maintain the trust in international statistics, their production is to be impartial and strictly based on the highest professional standards.

7. Agencies point out that their staff is bound by the general professional standards and codes of conduct of their organization. Some agencies also refer in this context to the declaration on professional ethics established by the International Statistical Institute.

Principle 3: Accountability and transparency
The public has a right to be informed about the mandates for the statistical work of the organizations.

8. Virtually all agencies report that documents concerning their programme meetings, including those concerning their decisions, are accessible to the public through their websites.

Principle 4: Prevention of misuse
Concepts, definitions, classifications, sources, methods and procedures employed in the production of international statistics are chosen to meet professional scientific standards and are made transparent for the users.

9. Agencies state that systematic reviews of the methodologies are employed, references of the sources of data in current and non-recurrent publications are clearly identified and users are given methodological explanations when source data are adjusted or imputed. Information on the original sources of the data disseminated, as well as source concepts, definitions, classifications, methods and procedures, is made available to the extent possible in the notes/technical notes of the outputs. Various agencies are in the process of codifying their operating procedures as part of explicitly formulated quality management frameworks.

Principle 5: Sources of official statistics
Sources and methods for data collection are appropriately chosen to ensure timeliness and other aspects of quality, to be cost-efficient and to minimize the reporting burden for data providers.

10. Several agencies report safeguards before sending out new questionnaires. Furthermore, in an effort to minimize the reporting burden on countries, numerous examples of bilateral and multilateral data-sharing arrangements are mentioned. The work of international agencies on the Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange should further facilitate the flow of data among the organizations.

Principle 6: Confidentiality
Individual data collected about natural persons and legal entities, or about small aggregates that are subject to national confidentiality rules, are to be kept strictly confidential and are to be used exclusively for statistical purposes or for purposes mandated by legislation.

11. For most agencies and international organizations the principle is not relevant since they do not collect, either directly or indirectly, individual data about natural persons or legal entities.

Principle 7: Regulations and measures
Erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics are to be immediately and appropriately addressed.

12. To reduce the risk of erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics, some agencies report special efforts to communicate with users and user groups providing, for instance, informative guides targeting different types of users.

Principle 8: Regional coordination
Standards for national and international statistics are to be developed on the basis of sound professional criteria, while also meeting the test of practical utility and feasibility.

13. Standards are developed through extensive consultations with member States and international agencies, including bilateral contacts, meetings of experts, technical expert groups and web forums. Furthermore, most agencies, involved in the development of standards, also report that they provide technical assistance on the implementation of international standards and monitor their implementation.

Principle 9: Use of international standards
Coordination of international statistical programmers is essential to strengthening the quality, coherence and governance of international statistics, and avoiding duplication of work.

14. Statistical units of the agencies and international organizations participate regularly in the meetings of the Statistical Commission, and in regional and specialized meetings on specific subjects in order to coordinate their statistical programmes and consult on joint activities.

Principle 10: International cooperation
Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the professional growth of the statisticians involved and to the improvement of statistics in the organizations and in countries.

15. The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities is currently developing tools through a number of task teams on how to improve the effective coordination of the technical cooperation activities of international organizations. Some agencies also report the creation of websites, which contain information on the development of national statistical systems and which are designed to create platforms for the exchange of information and knowledge.

16. The following areas have been mentioned as requiring more attention:

(a) Formulation of data quality frameworks for all agencies and further alignment among them, building on the extensive work done within the Committee in the past two years with respect to documenting and developing data quality frameworks by international organizations;

(b) Continued improvement of the effective coordination of technical cooperation activities by international agencies;

(c) Better coordination of statistical activities within some international organizations;

(d) Development of more educational material for users, to avoid erroneous interpretation and misuse of data;

(e) Further training and strengthening of the human resources in the statistical units of the international organizations.

17. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the continued commitment and efforts of agencies to implement the principles governing international statistical activities.